# THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

## The crisis of the 1750s and English party systems

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
*Cambridge*
*London New York New Rochelle*
*Melbourne Sydney*

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org



First published 1982
First paperback edition 2002

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress catalogue card number: 81-9999*

ISBN 0 521 23830 7 hardback
ISBN 0 521 52596 9 paperback

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# Introduction

> The true springs and motives of political measures are confined within a very narrow circle, and known to very few; the good reasons alleged are seldom the true ones. The public commonly judges, or rather guesses, wrong...I therefore recommend to you a prudent pyrrhonism in all matters of State, until you become one of the wheels of them yourself, and consequently acquainted with the general motion, at least, of the others; for as to all the minute and secret springs, that contribute more or less to the whole machine, no man living ever knows them all, not even he who has the principal direction of it.
>
> Chesterfield to Stanhope, 15 March 1754: Dobrée, v, 2098

> For my part, I could never perceive such a mighty mystery in politics, as some pretend. I do not know anything else it consists in, but consulting the good of the community, and pursuing short, easy and lawful means, which are always the safest and best, to obtain the end.
>
> *The Monitor*, 22 January 1757

## POLITICAL ACTION AND ITS HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

Eighteenth-century politics have been more often disparaged than understood. Modern writers sketching their general characteristics have held them up for condemnation as shallow, corrupt, incompetently conducted, lacking in principled commitment. Political tactics have been scaled down to cynical manoeuvres in which the issues at stake are presented as seldom more exalted than the distribution of place or pension, peerages or bishoprics, boroughs or military promotion. In reality, similar minutiae bulk large in politicians' business in any age. But for this period especially, political manoeuvre has been used by historians as an index of politicians' moral shortcomings – dismissed as the means of corruption rather than understood in its own right and on its own terms.

Newcastle in particular is supposed to have 'symbolised' such methods, thoroughly and systematically exploiting them. Early-eighteenth-century England has thus been depicted as a 'Venetian oligarchy', its members manning 'the pumps and sluices of the parliamentary system' and enjoying their 'aristocratic perquisites' on a 'spoils system'. Even the Whig–Tory clash at its fiercest, it has been claimed, 'represented not so much a conflict of ideology in a national sense, although that had importance, but personal and factional vendettas at the local level'. In spite of them, there grew up a 'system of government and patronage...developed by

Walpole' into 'the adamantine stability of eighteenth-century oligarchy', 'a self-gratifying oligarchy that held power for its own profit'.

> It was patronage that cemented the political system, held it together, and made it an almost impregnable citadel, impervious to defeat, indifferent to social change... After 1715, power could not be achieved through party and so the rage of party gave way to the pursuit of place.

Such shallow parodies must rank as historiographical myth, not disinterested analysis. Moreover, they have inhibited analysis, for, in the light of such judgements, political manoeuvres have been held to 'clutter the history of the eighteenth century with trivial detail and obscure the deeper issues which were involved'.

Moralising of this kind about the means of corruption and the rewards of power has almost always absolved historians, in their own minds, from the need to understand what politics in those years was ultimately about and how it worked. The specific consequences have been many. Preoccupations with patronage have given rise to a major misunderstanding about the nature of 'single party government' in early eighteenth-century England: that it was the form of dominance which followed 'the total defeat of the Tory party in 1715 and its obliteration from the serious world of politics'.[1] That misconception has been challenged elsewhere.[2] The ability and industry of statesmen and administrators, too, has been grossly understated. Yet if, at times, historians have tried to redress the balance, to lighten their black picture of the establishment, they have often done so by emphasising and endorsing the propaganda of Whig–Patriot or of Tory oppositions as justified critiques of a corrupt regime. In the process, eighteenth-century rhetoric about corruption in high places has been taken literally instead of being interpreted as part of a political strategy. So too has the eighteenth-century claim that politics itself was a simple pursuit of obvious national interests, unless distorted for reprehensible ends. Here again, moralising has taken the place of explanation; and through a subtle and unnoticed shift of priorities, historians have adopted an anachronistic perspective, properly appropriate only to the early nineteenth century.

More serious still, though less obviously distorting, academic moralising has made eighteenth-century politics seem comfortably familiar: readily accessible to, and easily comprehensible by, the modern observer. The strangeness, the continually developing yet still almost wholly different mental world, of those years has been missed; and the intractability of the problems which arise from the attempt to explain such an alien culture has passed largely unremarked. This book is an attempt to reconstruct the rules of a far distant political game, to trace their development at a period of profound change, and to recapture the particular notion of political action itself as it was then understood. Its object is not to belittle the force of ideas. It is, rather, an example of the ways in

which both ideas and tactical manoeuvre mattered, and of the relative weight which ought typically to be attached to either.

Its theme is politics – the political dimension of government's activity. Yet 'politics' was only a minor part of statesmanship as it was then understood. The small numbers and elementary development of the civil service (to borrow a later phrase) meant that by far the larger part of the time of the men who figure here was taken up with the routine business of their offices, whether diplomatic, military, naval, financial, judicial, or that of the Royal Household. These men were often politicians as it were in their spare time. Nevertheless, politics was understood as something different from administration, law, financial policy or war strategy, and is not confused with them in this book. Politics was already both professional and ontological: for these men, politics was an extrapolation of their inner lives.

Despite a modern proliferation of biographies as well as studies of individual ministries, it is still scarcely possible to form from them an authentic idea of what eighteenth-century politics was like to experience or to participate in. Biographies in particular have usually been written on a chronological scale so large as to leave their subjects vulnerable to generalised accounts of individual motive and of the bearing of constitutional conventions on political change. The narrative offered here is consequently highly detailed. It could not have been otherwise. The scale has been deliberately chosen in order that the explanations employed could be fully specific: that is, not of equal standing with any case purportedly established by the presentation of an alternative set of detail.

More sorts of action than high political manoeuvre alone were, in different degrees, talked about by contemporaries in political terms. Yet argument in the press and the activities of the mob are here given little place, not because there was not a great deal of both but because both are shown to be of slight importance by a fully specific account of the ways in which power was actually held and redistributed among the small group of men at St James's and Westminster who really mattered. Through a correct conception of political action, and attention to the appropriate arena, the fight to win and retain power emerges as far more complex, and far less recognisably modern, a process than has been commonly supposed. It is those tactical complexities which are the subject of this study and which reveal other spheres of political action as subordinate. Popular political agitation is demonstrated to be just such a subordinate sphere, even at the moment in 1756 when Newcastle resigned in the midst of the outcry which followed the loss of Minorca. It is remarkable, nevertheless, that politics outside the inner élite was permeated with tactical conceptions derived from its conduct, which, though not accurately understood at large, was seen in terms appropriate to the way it was actually fought out. Public awareness of political issues, too, was widespread. 'We are all politicians in England, from the nature of

our constitution', wrote one commentator, announcing his self-evident premise; 'every man thinks he has a right to reason upon all occurrences where the public are concerned'.[3]

There was nothing unusual, in that respect, about the 1760s. Society was equally politicised by the activities of the élite. That process is not the theme of this book, though in order to understand it, it is necessary to relate it to the detailed conduct of affairs at the centre. Attention to the political gestures of mobs, riots, broadsheets and ballads is no short cut; the political situation within which these things were important (when, and in so far as, they were important) was created by the politicians. It was created 'constitutionally'. Eighteenth-century England was not an oriental despotism: the public, its interest, its judgements and its aspirations, mattered intensely. But they mattered practically in so far as, and in the ways in which, they were brought into the political arena by politicians. They had no independent existence there. As de Lolme later described the popular role,

> Like those mechanical powers, the greatest efficiency of which exists at the instant which precedes their entering into action, it has an immense force, just because it does not yet exert any; and in this state of stillness, but of attention, consists its true *momentum*.[4]

As such, 'popular opinion' was open to all the vicissitudes which commonly attended political phenomena of that sort. It was open to use, for example, as an excuse and a justification for action the real causes of which were internally-governed high political manoeuvres. Consequently, perspectives on popular politics (as on other sorts) have been manufactured by politicians and historians as part of the same process of interpretation. Often, they have been manufactured falsely; one of the tasks of scholarship is to correct the misconceptions involved in such manufacture, redressing the perspective in which the general features of an age are to be viewed.

Until the Seven Years' War, Hanoverian England lived under the threat (at times immediate, at times distant) of invasion and revolution. The basis of political loyalties was a dynastic commitment. Apart from this, what contemporaries were engaged in was not, chiefly, a 'struggle to defend, amend or radically alter the political and social order'.[5] The minds of leading Whigs, whether in government or opposition, were dominated not by a canon of Whig doctrine drawn from the great seventeenth-century tradition – Harrington, Tyrrell, Moyle, Trenchard, Toland, Sydney and the rest – but by the practical details and daily techniques of their trades as politicians, diplomats, lawyers, financiers or courtiers. So far as is known, the Tories were even less given to political theorising. What mattered to them all was not some clash of radical and conservative ideologies, but (in the absence of revolution) the practice of politics – a practice expressed within and governed by its own terms, evolving its own precedents along its own lines.

The attempt to relate 'what men wrote and said' to 'what they

actually did'[6] in politics has been hindered by fundamentally mistaken assumptions about the political realities of Hanoverian England. So, too, historians anxious to establish the existence of an 'alternative structure of politics' from the middle decades of the century in the form of popular political consciousness would have done better first to have discovered what the 'structure' actually was to which the pronouncements of the press and the activities of the mob were allegedly alternative. A new and synoptic view of that basic element in parliamentary politics, the party system, is one outcome of the detailed narrative which follows. But it was not only party structures which diverged widely from modern accounts of them. Eighteenth-century politics cannot be understood on the assumption that it differed from its modern equivalent only in its actors and issues. 'Political action' was itself different; the boundaries of the idea changed through time, just as the reality it described was expanded by the rise of a cadre of professional politicians and propagated by the politicisation of English society. The concept of 'politics' employed by eighteenth-century Englishmen is misconceived, too, if it is treated as no more than an aspect of the changing role of politicians *qua* administrators. The State then undertook few of its modern functions; but where it did, those functions were seldom made political issues. The point is rather that politicians behaved differently *qua* politicians, in attending to any substantive issues, by conceiving differently of political action itself. Any act is incomprehensible without a prior appreciation of the *genre* to which it addresses itself, just as one cannot understand 'Hamlet' without recognising it to have been written as a tragedy. Philosophers are familiar with the need to 'enter into the rationality' of an act in order to explain it. For the historian, this process is partly one of identifying the *genre* of political action, partly of re-thinking conduct in *that* mental language; and it is not here supposed that 'explanation' in this sense depends on establishing a tight chain of causality.

Mid-eighteenth-century assumptions about the sphere of the political, however, were in flux in a way closely linked to the destruction of the Whig–Tory Jacobite polarity. The crucial aspect of political action was thus gradually being transformed from an external assent to principles of party doctrine to an internal search for principles of 'honest', moral, personal action. If contemporaries were confused as to the basis of party-political loyalty, through being seldom called on accurately to discriminate between interested personal attachment, dutiful service to the King, and assent to the tenets of the Whig state, still more have modern observers been unable to conceive of a 'grammar of assent' sufficiently unified to replace the Namierite and anti-Namierite theories of the role of 'corruption'. A greatly exaggerated and *a priori* attention has been paid to both patronage on the one hand and ideology on the other as a result of ignorance about, and misunderstanding of, politics itself.

What was evident in the 1750s was not an articulated clash of clearly

held systems of ideas but the misunderstandings, deceits, confusions of mind and cross purposes appropriate to real politicians acting tentatively in a world not yet falsely rationalised by the forward-looking radical perspectives of nineteenth-century Whig historians. Furthermore, political and constitutional conflict is misconceived if seen as a debate between theories of what the constitution *was*. The general outlines of the constitution as then conceived were at once too basic to be open to legitimate challenge by a loyal subject, and too general to incur it. What was at issue was its implementation. The object of contention was thus a disparate collection of precedents existing, not on a high level of generality, but on a middle level as a series of tactical lessons about, for example, how an opposition was to be conducted, how the role of the King could be dealt with, and how a ministry could be made to cohere.

Twentieth-century conceptions of political action differ fundamentally from those current in the eighteenth. They may usefully be contrasted. A modern political scientist has declared that 'The essence of a political situation, as opposed to one of agreement and routine, is that someone is trying to do something about which there is not agreement; and is trying to use some form of government as a means and as protection.'[7] In the 1750s, politics was neither the equivalent nor the inevitable expression of such disagreement; nor did politics come into existence in such situations as the means of solving it. 'Politics' created disagreements in order that they might be resolved by political rules. This semi-autonomous character of political conflict, one essential feature of British politics since 1688 if not earlier, meant that political situations were the expression of men acting politically, not the disease for which political action was the cure. As Dodington argued: 'to people, who by their situation, are thrown into politics, action, in that case, is what life is to the body. We cannot cease to live for a time, and then, take up life again: so in politics we must act, in some way, or another, and we can't cease action, for a time, and then take it up again.'[8]

An uninterrupted current of political activity and consciousness ran on even when there *was* agreement on substantive issues, acting to unsettle the situation and to give occasion for 'political' responses. Similarly, tragedies are not written because of a desire on the part of the public to express pity and terror; those emotions are evoked in audiences which seek to be shown their participation in a wider, a fully generalised human predicament and to have their belief in their participation heightened, not because they are impelled by an overwhelming sense of that participation which demands catharsis. Naturally, this metaphor presupposes the receptivity of men to certain themes; in the same way, political action at any time presupposes conventional motives for conflict, among which is a perpetual process of 'social reconciliation and agreement': 'perpetual disagreements which arise from fundamental differences of condition, status, power, opinion and aim'.[9]

Two false conclusions might be inferred from this general view. The first is that 'Government is routine up to the point where someone questions it and tries to change it; then it ceases to be routine and becomes a political situation.'[10] The reality of mid-eighteenth-century practice was more complicated, for two discontinuous paraphrases of this view then co-existed. According to one of these, 'government' and 'politics' were not discrete in this sense; stable government was merely a political situation with one party securely in control. Yet, further, there existed a notion of political stability unfamiliar to us. Drawn from a view of politics as an art to contain society's tensions by a series of checks and balances, the alignment of their political and institutional expression, the ideal state of public affairs was thought of as tranquil, uncontentious, silent, and static. All disturbances of a system thus defined became, *ipso facto*, illegitimate attempts to engross power. The two views were reconciled, though pessimistically, by the implication of the second: politics in the 1750s was dangerously liable to strike contemporaries as futile, repetitive, and sterile. Even when Pitt and Fox clashed in the Commons on 16 April 1751 over the 'General Naturalisation Bill' (a precursor of the 'Jew Bill' of 1753, a measure much attended to by historians anxious to argue the substantive importance of 'issues'), Walpole recorded that 'people could not help smiling to see Caesar and Pompey squabbling, when they had nothing to say'.[11] Or, as it was expressed elsewhere, a party man

> may repeat the same observations and the same wit over and over again at every club; for a party jest is never worn thread-bare, and a party argument never answered, even when it is confuted.[12]

For such reasons, it is wrong to condemn the 1750s by crediting radical activity in that decade with being socially purposive by contrast to 'official' politics: in so far as they were political, they both partook of a common autonomy.

The second false inference which has been drawn is that 'Politics is about policy, first and foremost; and policy is a matter of either the desire for change or the desire to protect something against change.'[13] Politics in the 1750s is not to be condemned as merely factional because it fails to fit some such model. Rather, the decade reveals the validity of an alternative model that registers the concern of politics with the pursuit of power; politics was 'about' policy only in the sense that 'Hamlet' was 'about' a court intrigue in Denmark. Policies were partly contingent upon political action; partly the counters in terms of which political action took place and was registered. But it happened in other terms as well, apart from policy: the arrangement of offices, and personal ambitions for them; votes in elections and in parliamentary divisions; a propaganda war.

If 'policy' is an adequate synonym for 'issues', more may be said on

the second point. Ministerial politics have seldom been written about in a way which takes account of Horace Walpole's warning: 'I do not pretend...to assert, that parliamentary determinations are taken in consequence of any arguments the Parliament hears; I only pretend to deliver the arguments that were thought proper to be given, and thought proper to be taken.'[14] Similarly even Bolingbroke, who was atypical in his willingness to express his political stance in general terms, wrote: 'A man who has not seen the inside of parties, nor had the opportunities to examine nearly their secret motives, can hardly conceive how little a share principle of any sort, though principle of some sort or other be always pretended, has in the determination of their conduct.'[15] Nevertheless, his most recent biographer condemns him for not planning a forward strategy and for lacking 'real conviction' in his 'declarations of principle'.[16]

What to modern observers seem failings are in fact among the defining characteristics of a quite different notion of political action prevalent in the eighteenth century. In respect of the content of policies, it has not escaped notice that the 1750s contain no more than premonitions of the great conflicts of succeeding decades: 'The issues of the fifties were... highly personalised as questions of succession to the crown and to high office.'[17] Appropriately, therefore, this is a study of what Horace Walpole called 'the manoeuvre of business';[18] the 'game', as an able Under-Secretary put it, of 'Jeu de Cabinet'.[19] Such a study is not here revealed as an aspect of the history of public administration. Historians still sometimes feel obliged to apologise for presenting the driving force of politics as something other than the rational, disinterested advocacy of policies on their substantive merits.[20] But it is clear from this account that the Whig party in the 1750s was tolerably unanimous in matters of policy until divided by the factious activity of its *frondeurs*; that Newcastle contended less for a set of policies than for the freedom to determine policy consequent on a dominant position in the ministry; that the oppositions of 1754–5 and 1755–6 were launched first and equipped with policies only later; and that the dominant theme in the political activity of the leaders was not an incipient world war but the relations of Court, Ministry and Commons, and the contest for the leadership of the Whig party.

Mid-eighteenth-century politics is not to be dismissed as unprincipled if it fails to seem purposive (in respect of imperial vision or domestic radical zeal) when such an expectation would be premature. It does not follow that politics was not a genuinely national concern; but it does follow that the sort of generalisations about motivation too often employed are discredited by a fully specific account of ministerial and party-political activity *per se*. No individual's career has been more distorted by such misunderstandings than Pitt's. Too often his rise to power in the 1750s has been presented as the apotheosis of a righteous Patriot, winning the confidence of a House of Commons alienated by Newcastle's violation

of the constitutional convention that the First Minister must sit in the lower House. But, as is made clear, no such convention is illustrated in the politics of that decade; nor did Pitt's rhetoric win the votes of more than a handful of MPs. Pitt won power – a limited share of power in July 1757 whatever was to happen later within the wartime coalition – through a long succession of behind-the-scenes intrigues in which the traditional arts of manoeuvre counted for almost everything. Exalted expectations of political purity were certainly entertained about Pitt and his allies, and the disillusion of those hopes accounts for the sharp reaction against him after the summer of 1757.[21] But it was not equally true that he owed office to 'overwhelming backing out of doors'.[22] Whether that existed or not, it played a negligible part in the calculations of those with whom Pitt had to deal. Even the Tories, it is now clear, swung round to support him in 1756 after his attacks on them in and before 1754–5 for tactical reasons, in their last manoeuvres as a party: alienated by Newcastle's betrayal of them after the Mitchell affair, they seized the chance of removing an Old Corps ministry and were compelled to support the Pitt–Devonshire administration by their prior commitment against a Fox–Cumberland one. It was undoubtedly necessary to whitewash Pitt's political persona in order to pave the way for tactical co-operation with the Tory party in parliament. But that co-operation was not compelled by Pitt's mass support out-of-doors, nor did any such support carry him to office or sustain him there. It is a detailed narrative of political action alone, like that which follows, which reveals the links between the élite and the populace; it discloses also the content of politics, drawn from the practice of its participants rather than from a view of the ends of their action inferred from a false perspective on its purposiveness. These chapters offer the first narrative of these years able, by adequately explaining one sphere of action, to show how others are subordinate to it.

The language in which 'the constitution' was attended to is a clue to eighteenth-century notions of politics itself. The point, for example, about the vigilance to be exercised over the balance of the constitution is that it prefigured or re-expressed the attention to a national political arena which is necessary if politics in recent centuries was to function as a national drama, the focus of attention, the stage on which issues could be played out in a way which *restricted* the need for involvement rather than *provided* that involvement.[23] Although the claim was often enough made in the 1750s that 'the legislative power is the people's right', it was always vulnerable to the reply that the legislature was the combination of King, Lords and Commons.[24] The theory that English liberties depended on a balance between these three elements was commonly accepted. But, in the light of it, any attempt at democratic or popular action as such could easily appear, or be made to appear, wholly illegitimate. At the same time, the continued vigilance of the people was held to be essential, as a check against the abuse of the other powers. The way in which talk about

the constitution was used is a guide to the official view not only of legitimation abstractly considered but also of the proper extent of popular political involvement. In one eighteenth-century view, a popular contract once made surrendered power, which became a trust,[25] just as it surrendered involvement, which was exercised vicariously. Thus the Old Corps found a place for popular opinion as a prop for the Hanoverian succession; and it may be that after the failure of the '45, and reassuring results in the general elections of 1747 and 1754, they came to rely more and more for tactical moral support (as well as for abstract legitimation) on the coincident fact – now becoming apparent – of substantial support at large for the Whig state.[26] 'Whiggism , it was objected against Bute in 1762, 'is a popular principle'.[27]

Nevertheless, eighteenth-century politics was suffused with an aristocratic ethic to an extent which modern academics have usually found difficult either to grasp or to admit. Bagehot correctly wrote:

> The London of the eighteenth century was an aristocratic world, which lived to itself, which displayed the virtues and developed the vices of an aristocracy which was under little fear of external control or check; which had emancipated itself from the control of the Crown; which had not fallen under the control of the bourgeoisie; which saw its own life, and saw that, according to its own maxims, it was good...The aristocracy came to town from their remote estates – where they were uncontrolled by any opinion or by any equal society, and where the eccentricities and personalities of each character were fostered and exaggerated – to a London which was like a large county town, in which everybody of rank knew everybody of rank, where the eccentricities of each local potentate came into picturesque collision with the eccentricities of other local potentates, where the most minute allusions to the peculiarities and careers of the principal persons were instantly understood, where squibs were on every table, and where satire was in the air.[28]

Prominent among the political values of such a society were ambition, pride, honour, loyalty, and integrity. It was a society in which it was possible to say, uncontentiously, that man and beast differed not so much as man and man. Neither the public nor the press was admitted by the professional politicans, whether commoners or peers, to be arbiters of what was honourable in their betters' conduct. The newspaper and pamphlet press was not attended to in that way, not because it did not give expression to the 'public mind' (though it did not) but because no such phenomenon had yet been created by professional politicians' appeals to a wider audience. Rather, those men sought for a principle of honourable conduct, in situations where later they were to seek instead for a programme, as a publicly demonstrable guide to action.

If Westminster was as much an hermetic community as in the nineteenth century, the way in which it thought its image was projected differed markedly. The statesmen of the 1750s did not suppose that 'politics was ultimately about the organisation and presentation of the parliamen-

tary community in such a way that the working class could be contained';[29] control of government, rather, was the prize for which they contended in Court, Ministry and Commons. It was the ultimate and most general prize; it was not the means to some other end, least of all to a plan of social manipulation. Hence it was even more the case in the 1750s than in the 1880s that the preoccupations of politicians 'could best be sorted out, not by talking directly to electors, but through the medium of clubs, the lobby, the dinner table, the race meeting, the visit to dine and sleep, the morning call, and the stroll in the park. This was where political work was really done.'[30] For the 1750s, one must add the King's Closet and his mistress', the 'drawing rooms' and levées at Court and Leicester House, and the gatherings at Newcastle's town house which went under the same names. Here power was won and exercised; here was the scene of almost all significant conduct.

This was the most important of the defining characteristics of mid-eighteenth-century politics. Others may be briefly listed. Westminster and St James's was, firstly, a single hermetic world. Beyond it, events at Court were scarcely known. Little more was known outside that world of Parliament's workings; and even within doors, few were aware of the secret history of the ministry. Newcastle himself, when out of office in the 1760s, shared this 'sheer ignorance of fact'.[31] Dodington identified the problem in writing to Fox of

> a conversation I assisted at...between a gentleman of much more consequence and understanding than myself, and the late Lord Townshend. The gentleman, with as little reserve as I treat you, entered into a discussion, with his lordship, of public affairs, then a little perplexed. When he was gone, my lord expressed his surprise, as they had differed a little in some points, that a man of his rank and reputation should hold such absurd opinions, which he showed the weakness of, from some facts which the gentleman, probably, could not be apprised of. To which I...replied: 'Really my lord I see no weakness in the gentleman's conversation, but in giving your lordship his opinion how to play a hand of cards, of which he could only see the backs, and your lordship saw the pips.'[32]

If 'Society' was ill informed, the amount of information available to a wider public was still smaller. Political reporting in the newspapers was as yet confined to a bare record of changes of office; occasionally, a curt prediction that such a change was imminent; hardly ever an inquiry into motive, a link drawn between ambition and policy, or a speculation on the reason for ministerial realignments. The 1760s in Ireland were similarly described:

> The liberty of the press was, at this period, shackled and restrained with many impediments. The debates in parliament were unreported, and even notes were forbidden, as against the rules of the House; all besides the ministers and members were, not only totally uninformed on the progressive subjects of legislation during the session, but commentaries, indirectly made on the

capacity of members, or public functionaries, were punished by arraignment at the bar of the Commons.[33]

The pamphlet press was hardly less ignorant of political tactics. Consequently, the chief obstacle to articulate opposition was a shortage of information with which to attack a ministry's conduct of public affairs. As a result, issues on which an opposition could be successfully launched and sustained day by day were not easy to find. The occasions of opposition were therefore either highly generalised, familiar topics such as militias or the liberties of the subject in relation to measures like the Sheriff Depute Bill of 1755, or topics whose nature was public and, though specific, easily accessible: the Marriage Bill; the Excise; the Jew Bill; Byng; Wilkes. But, for the most part, the process of politics was too private and too complex in the 1750s to admit of accurate popular scrutiny. Political advantage could therefore be drawn from claiming, as was perfectly credible, that

> The mechanism of government is too intricate and subtle, in all its various motions, for a common eye to perceive the nice dependencies and the secret springs, that give play to the complex machinery; and, in consequence, the generality of people, while the great political movements are passing before them, are full of undiscerning astonishment, and only gaze on in expectation of the event. Afterward indeed when the historian gives his narrative of facts, when he rejudges the actions of the great, and, from the ends which they had in view, and the means by which they pursued those ends, ascertains the colour of their characters, then the minds of men are opened, and they perceive honour and conquest, or disappointment and disgrace naturally following one another, like necessary effects from their apparent respective causes.[34]

In such a mental world, the very role of the press in promoting public discussion of politics was open to condemnation in virulent terms:

> Consider the tendency of these infinite swarms of little books, (which in the view of insinuating and scattering their poison with certainty and celerity, have been rendered both so portable and cheap) under the titles of *Craftsmen*, *Common Sense*, *Cato's Letters*, or, to come lower down, *Tests*, *Contests*, etc. etc. and you will not be surprised at the effect. In their several compositions, the quantity of poison wrought up, is such as no people upon earth ever had constitutions to bear; it catches every sense, insinuates at every pore, and running through the habit, is carried forward by so quick and imperceptible a circulation, that now, at last, the whole mass is so vitiated and spoiled, that it may well be doubted, whether by any political art it may ever be defaecated and wrought off.
>
> In respect of what I am upon, there is no occasion to inquire, in any political controversy, who is right, or who is wrong; it is not the thing in my thoughts, it is not my business; it is the controversy itself that is the SIN.[35]

'Why then', reasoned another pamphleteer, 'should we have recourse to the unnatural unconstitutional method of canvassing parliamentary concerns in newspapers and pamphlets?'[36] Contrary arguments were